

Once Again, to the Distant Observer

Raqs Media Collective

*To the distant observer
They are chatting of blossoms
Yet in spite of appearances
Deep in their hearts
They are thinking very different thoughts.'*

Ki No Tsurayuki (10th Century CE, Japan)

Dear Distant Observer,

We honour and acknowledge with pleasure your interest in us. Our unruly, unwieldy subcontinent is flattered with all your attention. Europe has looked at us often enough in the past, and then looked away, and then come back to look some more. And here you are once again – hovering, waiting, wanting to hold the gaze for a moment longer, anxious to understand what you consider to be our intensity, our loquaciousness, our excess, our austerity, our colours, our enigma, our complexity, our transparency, our soul.

In the history of the Occident's regard for 'elsewhere' this gaze has sometimes been tinged with homage; just as often it has expressed contempt. Both homage and contempt imply the attribution of a radical alterity to the object of observation. This construction of alterity forecloses the possibility of there being a meeting of gazes, or of any encounter in which the Occident could consider itself, not as the eternal, solitary beholder looking out from on high, but also as *looked upon*.

We would wager that in the enormous wave of interest that is currently being generated, for a variety of geopolitical and economic reasons in the 'New India' or in South Asia in general, there is little room for this gaze to be returned. What does the Occident look like, as it looks out at the world, is a question that is asked too little. Perhaps we need to start asking this question.

And we need to ask what happens to 'Indian' or 'South Asian' art when it is curated around the demands of a specifically 'Occidental' question, especially when both the question and the answer rely heavily, for the purposes of intelligibility, on the terms laden in the prefixes – 'Indian' or 'South Asian', 'Oriental' or 'Eastern'. In this regional preoccupation that is the rage, for the moment, in some sectors of contemporary art exhibition, the curious linkages between a generous invocation of alterity in the exhibition space, and the violent edge of how otherness is constructed on the streets of European cities through a racist xenophobia, is rarely examined. The constant back-and-forth slippage between a naive xenophilia and a sullen xenophobia goes unnoticed. The notion of alterity, of an un-interrogated, monolithic, distant otherness (whether spoken of in positive or in negative terms, in the language of homage or of contempt) remains sacrosanct.

Here, in Turin, your curiosity marks the possibility of a new conversation based on the act of looking. More accurately, we could say that it marks the possibility of a critical renewal of the terms of an extant conversation. Essentially because an effort is being made to ground the act of looking through a curatorial framework that privileges, rather than denies, contingency and provisionality, such that the prefix, 'Subcontinental' itself stands qualified by an assertion of contingency.

We consider this significant, especially at a time when, on your streets, demagogues of the *'Immigranti Basta!'* campaign distribute plastic cudgels, saying, "*dear citizens of Turin, dear Italians, we must defend ourselves from criminal ethnic gangs*" while they gesture to the cudgels as symbolic weapons designed to help imagine the possibility of clobbering the immigrant - perhaps some surprised, dismayed, itinerant, hard-working Bangladeshi flower seller.

Dear Distant Observer, we value the worth of your regard, for we know that it is better to have images, objects and sounds from distant spaces available for contemplation in your art spaces than it is for travellers and immigrants from other continents to be detained or assaulted in your streets, airports and railway stations. But let us try and ensure that we are able to maintain an attitude that allows us to question the answers that are put out, both by the

club-wielding racist on the street and by the well-meaning curator in the gallery. Strangely, the curator in the gallery might meet some success in combating the racist on his soap box only if s/he creates a condition of viewing that is itself open to question and challenge.

Having said all this, we wish to reciprocate the gift your curiosity with some questions of our own. A gift for a gift, one might say. Crucially, these questions hinge on the act of observation, and the fact of distance. This exhibition, or any collection of art works that undertakes a journey from a set of points of origin to a certain destination that is at a distance, may be said to produce and invite acts of 'distant observation'.

What does it mean to observe at a distance? What becomes clear when you see from afar, and what becomes occluded? What becomes aggrandised, and what comes undone? If we follow the pulls of these questions we might find ourselves in a place where the placement of any work of contemporary art in contexts remote from where it may have been produced becomes problematised productively, in several interesting directions. Like light that is stretched and bent as it travels into the gravitational field of an object so dense that it defies the normal laws of physics, these questions might yield interesting problems about what location, provenance and space might begin to mean when they have to meet the stringent tests of scrutiny at a far distance.

To think about each of these in turn:

What becomes clear?

Perhaps the fact that there are many resonances between different spaces that have little to do with their precise location. Observation at a distance can provide observers with the means to analyse their own habitations and habitus. Things can begin to seem uncannily similar, even if they are decidedly different. Things that happen in Turin to a Bangladeshi flower seller, and things that happen in Delhi to a Bangladeshi pedicab-driver, or to any of the faceless, paperless, nameless poor, anywhere in the world might begin to display many similarities. This means that despite the rhetoric of triumph, manifest destiny and national glory anywhere in the world, the

vantage point of distance often reveals that, despite appearances to the contrary, not everyone in the space observed is 'chatting of blossoms'. Similar things seem to be happening to a South Asian migrant in a South European city and to a South Asian migrant in a South Asian city, things that as far as their topography as events are concerned, seem to occupy roughly similar contours. This upsets the cartography of difference and hierarchy, as read across maps of culture and space, with which we are hitherto familiar. It is not inappropriate that contemporary art should occasionally engage in the hacking of received geographies. We could call this the potential within contemporary art practice of offering the gift of far sight to those that enter its domain.

What becomes occluded?

The very fact that even within a space that we designate as a unit, say Southern Europe, or South Asia, there are fault-lines and fissures that threaten our neat assumption of spatial integrity. Distance can block the perception of these tectonic disturbances. After all, contiguity need not mean continuity. This means that the distant observer can be vulnerable to crucial errors of perception and judgement, blurring distinctions when they do actually occur, merely because they occur at a great distance, and so appear to be negligible. Here, the disadvantage of occlusion needs to be carefully calibrated against the advantage of far sight, both of which are afforded by distance. It then depends on the observer; how he or she chooses to attenuate the distortions that may easily occur.

What becomes aggrandised?

Sometimes, what falls into place – and gets stuck there – is the simple predilection to amplify the difference of things that are, or were, distant. This can lead to negative or positive aggrandisement, to homage or to contempt. This usually occurs because the problem of unintelligibility is not satisfactorily resolved when that which was afar is brought up close through the act of viewing. In fact, on magnification, or on telescoping, the strange can seem stranger, and extant prejudices may get reinforced in powerful ways. Why does this happen?

The epidemic of 'India', 'China', 'Africa' and 'Mexico' exhibitions that have

done the rounds of major European venues in the last decade or so may have unwittingly contributed a jubilant affirmation of extant stereotypes and inaugurated the career of a few new ones. Notions of identity can get powerfully linked to the question of provenance when distance is brought into the mix, because things from afar are firstly and most importantly read in terms of the fact that they are from afar. What something is becomes eclipsed by the fact of where it is from.

Everything that comes from a distant geographical-cultural point of origin is then read predominantly against a matrix of things that too are seen as originating from the same space. This leads to the assumption that if enough objects from a given space were to be brought together at a time, then the objects themselves would automatically yield information about what made them look alike to the distant observer. However, their 'likenesses' may in fact be nothing other than an averaging out of what made them unlike the observer's own idea of himself/herself or his/her familiar co-ordinates.

This arbitrary 'likeness', a conceptual fiction, can also help construct a grid of authenticity, a criterion that can be used to index all things that originate from a given space. In such a way, the distant observer can judge an object that is named alien in terms of how true or authentic it seems to its designated alien-ness.

This search for the 'authentic' other is a fallacy born of a desire to view objects at a distance solely in terms of their alterity. However, the mere fact of alterity has nothing to do with distance. Things can be alien, or familiar, regardless of where they are found: close at hand, or far away. The aggrandisement, or amplification, of alterity is a fact that has little to do with distance but gets attributed to it, so as to distract attention from the scopic desires of the distant observer. Deep within this desire is a paradox of anxiety about the contamination that contemplation can induce.

Here, desire and anxiety intersect to create an interesting phenomenon. Things from afar, when telescoped and magnified and brought close to the field of the observer's attention, can generate a fear of invasion, of infection and contamination. The maintenance of their 'alterity' within the distant

observer's scopic regime can both stoke that anxiety and also be seen to act as a prophylactic against it. It works by inoculating the observer from the infection of the alien by subjecting him/her to 'difference' only in controlled doses.

What comes undone?

What can come undone is the assumption that cultures and places stand in anything other than a densely networked relationship to one another. Prejudices and extant notions can be subverted by the fact of resonance and the exposition of interwoven threads of history, politics, and the web that emerges from the commerce across distances in images and ideas. This can lead to modest epiphanies, such that it becomes difficult for any one person not to acknowledge the debts they owe to others who may be quite different from themselves. To do this is not to buy into a glib universalism, because all of this can happen as much due to inequalities in power and violence as to voluntary exchange and intercourse. The simple fact remains that the world cannot any longer be thought of in monadic terms. The privileging of centrality and achievement that may have been the ruling illusion of some protagonists and advocates of any cultural matrix comes undone when faced with the intimate relationship that their trophies have with the material of other cultures. The distant observer then begins to see the debts that one might owe to the other. Hierarchies, both temporal and spatial have then to be held in abeyance in favour of more realistic assessments based on careful observation.

Following from all this, it becomes clear, dear Distant Observer, that you have come upon an interesting place and vantage point. One that is contingent on the choices you make about how you frame the fact of distance. One that depends on how you construct your relationship to that which is – for the moment – brought up close to you from afar.

Do consider these thoughts, dear Distant Observer, as you begin to look in our direction, because, despite appearances to the contrary, deep in our hearts we may be thinking thoughts quite different from whether or not the garden has blossomed around us.

June 2006